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### *The ethnicisation of need*

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*Publication date:*  
2015

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
Guma, T. (2015). *The ethnicisation of need*. University of Glasgow.

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# The ethnicisation of need

## Questioning the role of ethnicity in the provision of support and services for post-accession migrants in Glasgow

This policy paper focuses on the role that ethnicity played in the provision of support and services for post-accession migrants living in Glasgow, based on intensive ethnographic fieldwork conducted throughout 2012 with Czech- and Slovak-speaking migrants living in the city. It is based on the PhD research project '*Everyday negotiations of in/securities and risks: an ethnographic study amongst Czech- and Slovak-speaking migrants in Glasgow*'<sup>1</sup> which was co-funded by the ESRC and Glasgow City Council.

The project inquired into what insecurities and risks Czech- and Slovak-speaking migrants perceive and experience in their everyday lives in the city and under what conditions and how these challenges occur. It also explored how these migrants dealt with emerging problems and how they built securities for themselves and their families drawing on resources and relationships in and beyond Glasgow.

This policy paper draws only on some of the findings of the study, which had a wider remit; here, the focus lies on problematic aspects of the way in which 'ethnicity' was often understood and applied in the field.

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*September 2015*



**Key points**

- The paper points out that using ethnicity as a straightforward, ‘naturally existing’ category and making it a requirement for individuals’ access to certain services has problematic implications for affected migrants as well as service providers and policy-makers.
- It traces how the shift in support and services targeting ‘the Roma’ in Glasgow in order to tackle what was understood as their long-standing discrimination and marginalisation amounted to an ethnicisation of need.
- The paper indicates that this mobilisation of resources led not only to the exclusion of some migrants from much needed services but that specific related practices also essentialised Roma as a homogenous group with greater needs, thus perpetuating their stigmatisation and marginalisation as a ‘population at risk’.
- The paper also illustrates how ethnicisation can hinder our understanding of migrants’ risks, when migrants are effectively blamed for the risks they encounter. Instead of construing them as lacking knowledge and understanding of ‘how things work here’, the research suggests that migrants’ everyday experiences and newly acquired insights in the ‘host society’ also inform their perceptions and negotiations of risks.
- Finally, it is argued that in order to understand risks and problems that migrants face in the cities and localities in which they live it is necessary to critically revisit our own concepts and understandings and to take seriously migrants’ views and experiences as they are shaped in specific places and contexts.

## Table of Contents

1. Introduction.....	4
1.1 Policy context in Glasgow .....	5
1.2 Methods and data of the study .....	5
2. Ethnicisation of need.....	8
2.1 More targeted services - better outcomes?.....	8
2.2 Understanding migrants' risks .....	13
3. Conclusion and recommendations .....	19

## 1. Introduction

While Glasgow has a long history of migration to and from other parts of Scotland, the British Isles, the Commonwealth countries, and various parts of the world, in the last decade, the city has experienced a significant increase in new arrivals from the eight Central and East European countries that joined the EU in 2004.<sup>2</sup> Data from the Workers' Registration Scheme (WRS) showed that between 2004 and 2011 around 95,000 people from these eight countries registered for work in Scotland, with nearly 11,000 registrations recorded in Glasgow.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, after Edinburgh, Glasgow is estimated to have received the second largest number of these new European migrants in Scotland, with Polish, Slovak, and Czech nationals (in that order) constituting the three biggest groups. The city is also considered to have a sizeable Roma population, especially from Slovakia and the Czech Republic. These new residents become part of and further add to an already culturally, linguistically, ethnically, and socio-economically diverse city when making their lives here. What difficulties and problems they face and how they can best be supported and encouraged to settle long-term in Glasgow is a key question for local policy-makers, public service providers as well as civil society.

This policy paper addresses those providing services to, working with and supporting new European residents in the city. It is based on the PhD research project '*Everyday negotiations of in/securities and risks: an ethnographic study amongst Czech- and Slovak-speaking migrants in Glasgow*' which was co-funded by the ESRC and Glasgow City Council and completed in early 2015. The project inquired into what insecurities and risks Czech- and Slovak-speaking migrants perceive and experience in their everyday lives in the city and under what conditions and how these challenges occur. It also explored how these migrants dealt with emerging problems and how they constructed securities for themselves and their families drawing on resources and relationships in and beyond Glasgow. Importantly, while the study aimed to bring to the fore the perspectives and understandings of migrants themselves, it also analysed their encounters and relationships with relevant stakeholders and how these shaped their negotiations of risks and insecurities.

This policy paper draws only on some of the findings of the study which had a wider remit; here, the focus lies on problematic aspects of the way in which 'ethnicity' was often understood and applied in the field, with contradictory implications for affected migrants as well as service providers and policy-makers. By drawing attention to and critically discussing various everyday practices and broader developments shaping the local support landscape, the paper aims to enable more equitable and self-reflexive ways of planning for and providing support to new residents and contribute to the creation of more inclusive environments in the city.

## 1.1 Policy context in Glasgow

The unprecedented post-accession migration from Central and Eastern Europe has been of great interest to Glasgow City Council as well as, more generally, to the Scottish Government in the context of demographic challenges that the city and the country as a whole face.<sup>4</sup> Halting the population decline of previous decades has been a vital element in the local and national authorities' policy and strategies to improve living standards in Scotland and strengthen its economy, in which Glasgow plays a central role. Migration from the new accession countries has indeed played a major part in Glasgow's population growth in recent years, which makes it Scotland's biggest city with a population of around 600,000 people.<sup>5</sup>

Various contributions that these and other migrants have brought to the city have also been acknowledged such as positive changes in schools and communities. The vitality and 'buzz' as well as a cosmopolitan outlook that the growing diversity of Glasgow appears to create is an important aspect in efforts to promote the city internationally. Attracting migrants and encouraging them to settle long-term has thus been a key priority for Glasgow City Council.

In this context, the council and other organisations have taken an active and positive approach to make the city welcoming for migrants. This includes various initiatives such as commissioning a study<sup>6</sup> in 2006 on post-accession migrants living in the city and the publication and dissemination of welcome packs in 2006-2007 aimed at new European migrants containing information about life in the city, services available and so on.

Glasgow is also the only UK member city of ROMA-Net, a pan-European network of cities with significant Roma populations in which statutory and voluntary organisations co-ordinate projects and services to improve the situation of this minority. In 2009, for example, Glasgow City Council produced an informational DVD *Living in Govanhill* (in English and Slovak) "to welcome and inform the Roma Slovak community" residing in the city.

Furthermore, various services and projects were established by the authorities and/or local civil society organisations and groups offering a broad range of support and help from general advice and information to more specialist services in the areas such as health, housing, employment, welfare, families and children.

## 1.2 Methods and data of the study

The PhD research project which began in 2010 took place within this specific local context. With its emphasis on the everyday experiences, practices and perspectives of migrants themselves it sought to address a gap in the existing evidence on new European migrants in Scotland.<sup>7</sup>

**Research population:** The project focused on Czech- and Slovak-speaking migrants who had come to the UK after 2004 and were living in Glasgow in 2012 when the empirical research was conducted. It used a language-based category in response to a major critique of mainstream migration studies which tend to approach migrants on the group level and pigeonhole individuals into ethnic or national ‘communities’ or groups that are presumed to be rather stable, homogeneous, and distinct, often resulting in essentialising claims. ‘Essentialising’ refers here to attributing a certain behaviour, trait or experience to a group of people and making it a defining characteristic of that group. This is often expressed in crude generalising claims such as ‘Roma have large families’ or ‘Polish migrants are competitive’.

Here, instead of treating nationals of these two countries as separate ethnic or national groups (such as Czechs, Slovaks, and amongst them Roma) and comparing them against each other, using this language-based group enabled the inclusion of migrants across national, ethnic and cultural boundaries. It also allowed the exploration of the role played by ethnicity and ethnic belonging, rather than taking them for granted.

In addition, the decision to choose language as the main criterion (rather than ethnicity or nationality) to delimit the scope of the study was also informed by two small pilot studies that were conducted in Glasgow in 2010 which pointed at an array of relationships and interactions between these migrants on different levels.<sup>8</sup>

**Research methods:** The study was based on 12 months of ethnographic research carried out in Glasgow throughout 2012. Ethnographic research is a specific type of qualitative inquiry that is traditionally associated with the disciplines of anthropology and sociology. In general terms, conducting ethnographic research entails participating in and observing the everyday lives of people studied in their ‘natural setting’ (instead of, for example, in a lab) in order to gain an in-depth understanding of the complex ways in which research participants make sense of the world and live their lives. Doing ethnography requires an extended and intensive engagement with the research field.

The fieldwork was carried out at different sites in Glasgow where Czech- and Slovak-speaking migrants met, worked or socialised. This included diverse settings such as support services, drop-ins, job centres, cafes, street corners, people’s homes, public parks and even the Scottish countryside.

The data collected during this fieldwork resulted from a combination of techniques including taking field notes, writing memos of observations, conducting ethnographic interviews and semi-structured interviews with migrants and key stakeholders, holding group conversations. It also entailed collecting secondary data including reports, policy papers, leaflets, and multimedia products such as DVDs and broadcast films.

**Research sample:** 28 migrants became key research informants who allowed the researcher to be part of their everyday lives and activities and would meet him repeatedly in various settings throughout the fieldwork period. Additionally, there were about 30 people who the researcher met less regularly but who participated in the study through interviews or group conversations.

The resulting research sample consisted of a wide socio-economic mix of individuals regarding aspects such as family status, age, class, employment status, nationality, ethnicity, and gender.<sup>9</sup>

**Research ethics:** It should be noted that all data were anonymised so as to prevent identification and traceability of the research informants and, with it, any potential negative consequences for them. For this reason, this policy paper does not identify individuals, places and organisations. While the paper tries to be as accurate as possible, more general descriptions for geographical locations (e.g., south Glasgow), groups and organisations are used to guarantee anonymity.

**Limitations and generalisability:** Given the relatively small number of research informants and participants, the study does not claim to be representative of the Slovak- and Czech-speaking migrant population in Glasgow or the UK. Its aim was not to provide statistical generalisations about challenges and problems encountered by Czech- and Slovak-speaking migrants living in Glasgow; rather, its strength lies in offering a qualitative, in-depth understanding of the complexities of these migrants' experiences, problems and difficulties in their everyday lives, at a specific time and in the local context of Glasgow.



## 2. Ethnicisation of need

One central problem identified in the study was what is termed here an ‘ethnicisation of need’. This refers to different processes and practices that attributed neediness to the ethnic category of Roma. This ethnicisation was found to occur on various levels and to be fundamentally connected to dominant ideas about the nature of ethnic groups and ethnicity.

### Understanding ethnicity

We often think about human society based on the idea that people are naturally organized into separate and distinct ethnic groups that are culturally different from each other. From this perspective, ethnic groups, cultures and (national) communities appear as one and the same. This is reflected, for example, in ideas that ‘the French’ are essentially different from ‘the British’, but also in the interchangeable use of categories such as ‘the Roma people’, the ‘Roma folk’ or the ‘Roma community’ as distinct from ‘the Slovak migrant community’, expressions which the study found to be regularly used by volunteers, project workers, activists and policy-makers alike.

This dominant view of ethnicity as fixed and naturally given has been challenged by various social scientists.<sup>10</sup> This paper draws on a boundary-making perspective on ethnicity as elaborated by the sociologist Andreas Wimmer.<sup>11</sup> Using a boundary-making approach shifts our attention from trying to define ‘what makes one a Roma and/or a Scot’ or to reach generalising statements about, for example, Slovak migrants towards examining the situations and processes in and through which the boundaries of an ethnic group are made and transformed. It invites us to reflect on the categories that are so often taken for granted with regard to migrants.

### 2.1 More targeted services - better outcomes?

The study observed a marked shift in resources and services offered by statutory and voluntary organisations in Glasgow starting in late 2011 and especially in the following year; institutionally provided support that had previously been available to EU nationals or East European migrants in general gradually gave way to services exclusively targeted at Roma migrants.

This was, for example, the case in one of the study’s key fieldwork sites, a service that had offered general advice and information to EU migrants in the south of Glasgow for

several years. Run by a local charity, it provided one-to-one advice by staff speaking English, Slovak and Czech both over the phone and in face-to-face meetings.

Alongside migrants from countries such as Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, Hungary and Romania, the service was attended predominantly by Slovak and Czech nationals, many of which were identified by the organisation as Roma migrants. Generally, the service attracted mainly those with limited English language skills who received help and support with a range of issues including everyday problems that they faced in the city.

The service was closed in 2012 amidst growing concerns within the organisation that service users were becoming too dependent on it. Providing support to migrants in their native language (Czech/Slovak) was considered, in the longer term, to hinder the improvement of the migrants' English language skills and their integration in the local community and city more generally. There were concerns that due to its broad remit and more general nature, the service would face difficulties evidencing its efficiency and impact, aspects increasingly required by funders. Indeed, securing funding for this type of project was becoming more difficult, especially in the light of austerity measures and cuts introduced by the then UK coalition government.

More generally, in Glasgow, more targeted services were encouraged at the time by an increased attention towards Roma migrants. In 2012, various services and initiatives focusing on areas such as employment, families, or health were newly launched or reconfigured to address the needs of this population by as many as twelve (non-governmental and statutory) organisations. Indeed, several months after the local charity closed the general advice and information service described above, it started a new community development project aimed specifically at Roma migrants.

Alongside the opening of new services and projects, there was a wide range of activities taking place such as surveys, training courses and meetings. A large conference, *Scotland's New Migrant Communities – Meeting the Needs of Roma*, was held at Glasgow City Council in 2012.<sup>12</sup> Although services targeting Roma existed well before the study's fieldwork began in 2012, this period saw an intensification and stronger integration of support and resources aimed at "the Roma population" not only living in the south of Glasgow but throughout the city and even more widely in Scotland.<sup>13</sup>

The growing attention towards and provision of resources for Roma residents in Glasgow was also part of wider policy developments, for example, at European level. In 2011, the European Commission published the *Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020*, outlining its "targeted approach" for Roma integration throughout Europe and making significant amounts of funding available for projects and services aimed at this population. Glasgow was particularly attentive to this new approach through the participation of local organisations in ROMA-Net.

A combination of local organisations' experience, a changing landscape of national and international funding, as well as policy developments on the local, Scottish, and European level contributed to a narrative which considered Roma migrants in Glasgow as specifically vulnerable and as having greater needs due to their experiences of poverty and continued

discrimination and exclusion from mainstream society, particularly in their countries of origin. It gave weight to the aim of redressing their marginalisation through concentrated efforts and the provision of ‘more targeted services’, an aim that many of those working with Roma migrants seemed to feel passionately about.

As the study found, however, the notion of Roma migrants in Glasgow as particularly vulnerable was not only produced and expressed in the form of specific narratives but was also reinforced and reproduced through certain local practices which ascribed neediness to the ethnic category of Roma, often with problematic implications. These will be outlined in the following.

▪ **‘Roma tick box’ as eligibility check**

Some organisations started to use a seemingly simple tick box form to ensure service users’ eligibility for services offered exclusively to Roma migrants. For example, at one of the study’s key research sites, a form was introduced which featured a box “Roma client” which would be ticked if applicable. With no other ethnic categories offered, it was different from commonly used ethnic monitoring forms where an individual chooses their ethnic belonging from a list of options. Here, the form served to evidence ‘being Roma’ as a precondition for having access to certain services. The study identified various problems associated with this practice:

**(Re)producing boundaries:** As the author observed in the one-to-one advice sessions, this box ticking exercise affected the relationship between the support worker and the service users. Not only was ethnicity a sensitive issue for many which made both service users and support workers uncomfortable about asking/being asked bluntly “Are you Roma?”; but it also instantly created a boundary between those answering yes (and thus identifying themselves as Roma) and non-Roma support workers where, previously, they had built rapport as fellow newcomers and/or fellow Slovaks or Czechs in Glasgow.

**Fixing identity:** The practice required people to have a singular and fixed ethnic identity. As it became apparent from interviews and conversations with research participants, many of those self-identifying as Roma amongst other identities had felt positive about being “less visible” in Glasgow due to the presence of a diverse population in the city. Others had talked about having no questions asked or getting no ‘suspicious looks’ from strangers in Glasgow when introducing oneself as Slovak or Czech or as coming from Eastern Europe.

This is not to say that many Roma identified primarily as Slovak, Czech, or EU citizens (which would be a rather individual question) but to emphasise that these different identifications were now available to them alongside that as Roma, man or woman, villager, city person, Slovak-speaking, Romany-speaking, and so on. The tick boxing exercise was experienced as reducing them to one aspect of their identity.

**Essentialising Roma:** This method of eligibility checking required and at the same time reinforced the idea that ‘the Roma’ existed as a clear-cut, homogeneous group existing out there which should have privileged access to a certain service. This not only proved difficult where a service user, for example, pondered about their eligibility due to identifying as ‘half-

Roma' but also made invisible the heterogeneity amongst the Roma population in Glasgow that the study encountered: for example, persons with varying educational backgrounds and skill sets, at different points in their life course, Slovak-speaking, Romany-speaking, darker and lighter skinned people, people who had migrated as singles, as families or who had built a family in the UK, had come from cities or villages in their countries of origin, all aspects which might be as equally or more significant in people's lives and their trajectories.

***Creating tensions:*** At the same time, the shift in resources towards Roma projects also led to resentment and tensions between migrants in Glasgow. Some non-Roma Czech- and Slovak-speaking migrants who felt increasingly excluded from services based on their ethnicity expressed their discontent about the 'special treatment' that Roma migrants seemed to be receiving. Whereas they had previously encountered each other at support services and in projects as fellow new residents looking for help, those concerned about the decreasing support available to them began to question not only services targeted specifically at Roma but the latter's deservingness of support altogether.

***Undermining the very aim of the 'Roma tick box':*** The study found that some migrants reacted to the use of ethnicity as an eligibility criteria by simply 'ticking the Roma box' even though they thought of themselves as non-Roma. Such acts of boundary-crossing can be interpreted as intentionally pointing out the arbitrariness and practical ineffectiveness of the box ticking exercise. They also clearly undermine the very aim of introducing this kind of eligibility criteria, for example, when organisations rely on such data to evidence their impact on the target population.

#### ▪ Identifying 'the Roma' in Glasgow

Checking eligibility through tick-boxing was not the only way in which organisations would identify Roma in Glasgow. Information on Roma was mostly gathered from workers and practitioners in the field. This resulted partly from an acknowledgement amongst the latter of the sensitive nature of collecting data on ethnicity, especially with regard to Roma who were thought to be reluctant to identify themselves due to fears of being discriminated against. The study, however, found several issues with this practice of data collection:

***Generating unreliable data:*** Because information on the number of Roma was often based on rough estimates produced by relevant organisations and practitioners, the resulting data should be treated with caution. However, such data were in many cases treated as facts. For example, at the time of this empirical study an oft-quoted number of Roma in Glasgow was 2,000-3,000. This figure was first mentioned in a report<sup>14</sup> published in 2007 and referred to the population of Czech and Slovak Roma living in one particular area of the city based on estimations by support workers and other practitioners.

However, the number contrasts remarkably with other data sets (see **Table 1** below). For example, according to the WRS data, around the time, there were just 376 Slovak and 213 Czech nationals registered in the whole of Glasgow. As part of the increased attention towards Roma described above, a more recent mapping study was carried out in 2013 to estimate the number of Roma for the whole of Scotland. The study estimated between 3,000

and 4,000 Roma to be living in Glasgow, with the figure for the whole of Scotland being between 4,000 and 5,000.<sup>15</sup>

Data source	Measure	Figure
Blake Stevenson 2007 (based on WRS data 2004-2006)	Number of registrations by Slovak and Czech nationals in Glasgow	589
Adamova <i>et al.</i> 2007	Estimate of Slovak and Czech Roma in Govanhill, Glasgow	2,000-3,000
McCollum <i>et al.</i> 2012 (based on WRS data 2004-2011)	Number of registrations by 'A8 migrants' in Glasgow	10,905
The Social Marketing Gateway 2013	Estimate of Roma population in Glasgow (irrespective of country of origin)	3,000-4,000

**Table 1 - Varying approximations to the Roma population**

**Reinforcing stereotypes:** Estimating the number of Roma through stakeholder organisations did not only lead to unreliable data; it also reinforced stereotypical images of this population. The information provided by practitioners and workers was often based on their 'assumptions' and stereotypical imaginations of Roma culture, look and lifestyle. For example, some of the 'assumptions' about Roma that the author encountered during the fieldwork included "poor", "uneducated" or "speaking with a thick accent" and the racialisation as "dark-skinned". Another stereotypical image was the large size of Roma families. This was amongst the identification criteria used, for example, in the aforementioned 'mapping study' of the Roma population in Scotland.<sup>16</sup> Individuals not fitting such stereotypical assumptions would by default not be 'identified' as Roma, thus resulting in a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy of Roma as poor, uneducated, etc.

**Constructing Roma as needy:**

Identifying 'the Roma' through those organisations and practitioners working with Roma also gave weight to and reinforced the idea that Roma are somehow 'naturally' a vulnerable group. Through such attribution of neediness to 'the Roma' as an ethnic group or ethnicity, Roma migrants in Glasgow were constructed as poor and needy, a vulnerable population 'laden with problems' or, in other words, a population 'at risk'. This is not to deny that many who would either identify themselves with or be categorised by others as Roma faced significant, often

structural barriers. But making ethnicity central to considering issues and problems faced by these migrants, turning an issue into a 'Roma issue' neglects other (potentially more) relevant

**Perpetuating stigma:** The depiction of Roma as "needy" perpetuates further their stigmatisation and marginalisation. The term 'Roma' as an encompassing category representing different groups historically dispersed throughout Europe is a relatively recent one. It was adopted by the delegates of the first World Romani Congress held in London in 1972 to reject pejorative terms existing at the time such as Tsiganes, Zigeuner, Gitanos, Gypsies and so on. Nearly four decades later, however, the very term which was agreed upon in order to tackle stigma seems to be unable to disrupt the stigmatisation.

factors that give rise to increased vulnerabilities, such as the specific migration process interacting with educational background, language skills, age, and gender.

***Denying people's agency:*** The powerful notion of 'the vulnerable Roma' also runs the risk of reducing or denying Roma their agency, and thus contributes to a patronising image of powerless and hopeless victims, unable to deal with and overcome difficulties on their own. This could be seen, for example, in pessimistic remarks noted during the fieldwork in 2012 such as the following made by a senior member of a third-sector organisation working with Roma: "These people, the Roma, will never get out of poverty". Such comments were usually made in the context of accounting, from the organisation's point of view, for the difficulties in bringing about a measurable change to people's lives.

## 2.2 Understanding migrants' risks

Identifying risks that migrants face in the localities where they live and responding to new residents' needs often present a challenge for policy-makers, service providers and other practitioners in the field. Rather than offering a comprehensive list of risks encountered by post-accession migrants in Glasgow, this section aims to critically reflect on the way we think about (and deal with) risk. An empirical case from the study is introduced in order to illustrate how the ethnicisation of need can hinder our understanding of migrants' risks.

### Understanding risk

Risk is commonly thought of as a quantifiable and measurable phenomenon. Hence, when we talk about risks we do so in technical terms and numerical expressions. For example, we say "the risk for x event to happen is high", which means that there is high probability, say 80%, of that event occurring in the future. Such calculations are thought to be helpful tools for making informed decisions and mitigating potential negative effects. Risk is thus often understood as a neutral, 'scientific' category that can be objectively measured. Following this logic, an uncertainty or danger that is associated with fears, perceptions and emotions that individuals hold about the possibility of adverse events is categorised as 'perceived', which connotes that the risk is 'not real'.

This distinction between 'objective' and 'perceived' risk, which prevails both in the common use of the term as well as in the literature on risk management, has, however, been challenged by various social scientists as a common fallacy characteristic of Western thought.<sup>17</sup> They have argued that there is no such thing as an 'objective risk', as risk is always socially constructed. For example, the statistical record of traffic accidents alongside a particular road can indicate a low level of risk but significantly differ from local residents' experience that the road is dangerous. Moreover, many risks are contested, especially when the science is inconclusive, think, for example, of the varying understandings of and responses to climate change, specific medical treatments or particular diets. Thus, whether something constitutes a risk, how risky a specific action or situation is, and how to deal with a risk are not merely questions of technical calculation and objective assessment but subject to social and cultural negotiations.



### ▪ The case: the risk of Roma children being taken away by the UK social services

One of the central findings of the study was that many everyday uncertainties and problems encountered by Czech- and Slovak-speaking migrants in Glasgow were shared across categories of ethnicity or nationality. For example, with regard to issues of employment insecurities, health issues, and problems with state provided welfare, individuals' experiences were less dependent on their ethnicity but rather affected by differences in migration route, English language proficiency, social networks, educational background, age and family status, etc. as well as wider societal developments such as social welfare reforms, neoliberal restructuring of work, and globalisation.

In contrast, concerns around children being taken into care by the British social services were identified by the study as one of the few issues that affected especially Roma migrants from the Czech Republic and Slovakia. This theme first emerged during the fieldwork at one of the study's research sites, a drop-in for Roma migrants.

During one of the drop-in sessions in September 2012, many Roma migrants expressed great worries about their children. The research found that these concerns had been triggered by the broadcasting of a documentary on a Slovak TV channel which told the story of a Slovak mother living in London whose children had been removed from her by the UK social services.<sup>18</sup> The fieldwork further indicated that the documentary and the (Slovak/Czech) media frenzy<sup>19</sup> that followed had a powerful effect on Roma migrants and their families throughout Glasgow (and other parts of the UK).

*The drop-in:* The drop-in was an informal service offered once a week at a local church in the south of Glasgow. The service was attended mainly by Czech- and Slovak-speaking Roma living in the local neighbourhood. Generally, the drop-in provided a space for these migrants to socialise and share their problems, as well as get advice on various issues (for example, housing, finance, welfare) in a more informal setting. Many also brought their children or grandchildren along who enjoyed the sheer size of the indoor space and the activities provided by the staff and volunteers.

In Glasgow this was evident in the actions that some Roma migrant families took in response to what they perceived as the risk of their children being taken into care. This involved cases such as when families faced difficult situations (e.g., being evicted from their home) but would no longer seek advice or help from local organisations because of fears that this could involve police or local authorities who might take their children away from them.

Similarly, a number of Roma families withdrew their children from participating in a free meal scheme at a local school as they were worried that this might lead social workers to take their children into care. At the drop-in, attendees also began to be wary of visitors, often asking staff members or volunteers whether a visitor belonged to the Scottish social services.<sup>20</sup>

Notably, the research found that non-Roma Slovak and Czech parents in Glasgow were not taking similar actions in order to avoid contact with British authorities. Although some (non-Roma) research participants with small children had heard about this well publicised case of Slovak children being taken into care in the UK (for example, through friends, the media, or from Roma migrants), they did not seem much fazed by these events. This was even more remarkable considering that the above documentary was based on the experiences of a non-Roma Slovak family living in the UK.

▪ **“The risk is low or non-existent” - responses of project workers and volunteers**

The impact that these events had on Roma migrant families and the actions taken by some of them did not go unnoticed amongst the various service providers and supporting organisations working with Roma migrants in the city. However, amongst the non-Roma staff, workers and volunteers in the city, there seemed to be a general sense that this was not a significant issue and that the risk of Roma families in Glasgow having one’s children taken away did not exist or was very low. This response was based on a combination of the following key assumptions:

**‘A perceived, not real risk’:** Although the concerns of the families were recognised, they were considered to be an emotional overreaction to the sensationalist (Czech/Slovak) media coverage of a single case. Staff members pointed out, for example, that the number of Roma children taken into care in Glasgow was low (a social worker from the local social services later spoke of “only five or six children” in 2013/14).

The fears were thought to be unjustified, and the resulting panic considered to be fed by “rumours” and “misinformation” rather than being informed by “concrete cases”, actual examples and figures.

**‘Roma fear and mistrust authorities’:** Amongst those working with Roma migrants, the mistrust shown towards state authorities was discussed as being a ‘common trait’ of Roma people; the painful history of persecution that “the Roma had suffered back home” had led them to be generally fearful of authorities. Such references were often made with only vague knowledge of the history of violence against Roma in the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

**‘Migrants misunderstand the system’:** The subsequent actions taken by Roma families were thus deemed to be “strange”, difficult to understand, or irrational. It was argued that migrants lacked an understanding of social services in the UK. Workers and volunteers alike pointed out that “measures and safeguards” such as strict court procedures and the role of the Commissioner for Children were in place to make sure children were separated from their families only if that was in the children’s best interest. Thus, trust was placed in the legitimate and rational workings of the UK child protection services as opposed to the idea of arbitrary removals of Roma children.



### ▪ Risk as a contested category - interpreting the competing views

The study inquired into how these different views of Roma migrant families in Glasgow and the non-Roma project workers, volunteers (and other migrant families) could be understood. Taking a sociological and anthropological perspective of risk (see the box *Understanding risk* above), the study was not concerned with the question which of the views was right or wrong but considered what understandings, beliefs and experiences informed the two competing accounts.

**Numerical evidence:** Within Scotland, the relevant children's social work statistics published by the Scottish Government do not include information on the nationality or detailed ethnic group (such as Roma) of affected children. But, with a view to the UK, more generally, a BBC 4 report *Roma children: Britain's hidden care problem* (which was broadcasted in December 2012) noted that there was a disproportionately high number of Roma children taken into care in specific areas (such as Rotherham, Sheffield, London) in the UK when compared to the national average.

Citing statistics issued by the Department of Education, the BBC report claimed that the number of Roma children taken into care or under child protection plans had quadrupled since 2009, and that several local authorities' social services around the UK were increasingly coming into contact with Roma families.<sup>21</sup> The report also stated that out of the 150 Slovak children who had been removed from their families in the UK, 90% were Roma.<sup>22</sup> However, the accuracy and validity of these figures could not be independently ascertained, and the programme made no reference to Glasgow.

As noted in the previous section (see *Table 1* above) there was no reliable data available on the number of Roma (and Roma children) living in Glasgow, which makes it difficult to establish whether they were being separated from their families more or less often than other ethnic/national groups in Glasgow or compared to the national average. Nevertheless, non-Roma volunteers and project workers in Glasgow considered the number of Roma children taken into care in the city to be low, which underpinned their perception that the risk was small or did not exist.

Although Roma families encountered during this study in Glasgow did not know anybody personally whose children had been removed by social services in the city, they knew of cases involving Roma migrant families elsewhere in the UK. This included two cases which had also been reported on Slovak TV news in August 2012.<sup>23</sup> The increased attention to and knowledge of similar cases gave rise to a perception amongst Roma families in Glasgow that they might be "targeted" by the British social services.

The analysis showed that, when considering these different pieces of information together, it could not be conclusively determined whether the risk of Roma children being taken away in Glasgow was disproportionately high or not based on numbers and statistics (alone).

**Past experiences:** At the drop-in, some Roma migrants explained their concerns by pointing out: "Because we're Roma, they target us again," or, "It's like before." The research found that a long history of oppression of various Roma groups in what is now Slovakia and

the Czech Republic provided an important factor in explaining the marked difference in Roma and non-Roma parents' responses to the risk of children being taken away in Glasgow.

State-sponsored forms of persecution and violence against Roma populations included the forced removal of children and sterilisation of Roma women<sup>24</sup> which constituted a particularly painful collective memory for those identifying as Roma. In contrast, non-Roma migrants did not seem to feel specifically targeted and instead thought of the reported cases as exceptions for which only the affected parents were to blame.

While staff working with Roma in Glasgow variously referred to the marginalisation and persecution of Roma peoples in their countries of origin, often the details of such histories remained elusive. Vague references to the violent past suffered by Roma migrants emphasised their victimhood as well as painted a picture of migrants still being caught up in their fear of authorities. Moreover, the Roma families' assumed general mistrust of state authorities seemed to further support the view that these migrants were panicking without any concrete reasons. Or, as some staff members argued, "these things happened over there, not here!"

However, the research found that, firstly, not all Roma migrants were (uniformly) affected by the events: as noted earlier, people in Glasgow responded to this issue in different ways, from avoiding any contact with state authorities, withdrawing children from certain services, being wary of strangers, to simply sharing and discussing their concerns with support workers and volunteers.

Secondly and importantly, the perspective of many Roma migrants in Glasgow who saw the risk of their children being taken away as 'real' and the ways in which Roma families tried to deal with this risk were not only informed by the past 'back home' but also by their everyday experiences in Glasgow.

***Everyday experiences of prejudice in Glasgow:*** The fieldwork documented various occasions when child protection issues were discussed as a concern by the staff and volunteers involved at the drop-in for Roma migrants. This included worries about, for example, children coming or leaving the drop-in unaccompanied by their parents or relatives. In some cases, relationships between children and their parents/relatives/carers were thought to be "loose" and difficult to establish. There were particular worries about care responsibilities with regard to children under the age of three.

Some of the questions asked revolved around the responsibility amongst the adult attendees: "Who is responsible for these children coming in?" "Which child belongs to which parent?" A registration process for attendees and children was frequently discussed and eventually introduced, allocating attendees to family groups and recording children's ages, as a means to enable workers to determine familial or other relationships between adult attendees and children.

Moreover, staff and volunteers sometimes expressed their concerns about the lack of education and overall development of attending Roma children. Some of the children who used the drop-in were thought to be "wild" and have "challenging" behaviour. Issues such as a "lack of concentration" and "low levels of attainment" were also frequently mentioned,

echoing concerns more widely discussed by educational providers in Glasgow with regard to Roma youth. To address some of these ‘developmental’ issues a separate area for younger children was created to provide a “calmer environment” for them to “play and concentrate”, and parents were encouraged to “engage more” with their children.

The qualitative analysis of how many Roma families in Glasgow came to perceive themselves to be at risk of losing their children found that, although unacknowledged by the staff members at the drop-in (and thus not part of their risk evaluation), there was a connection between the worries about Roma children being taken away and the staff members’ concerns about the ways in which the Roma attendees were handling their children or their care responsibilities.

While the drop-in staff’s views seem irrelevant and unconnected to the workings of Glasgow child protection agencies, from the perspective of the Roma attendees they constituted an everyday experience in which their parenting and child care abilities were questioned and problematised. Such views seemed to relate to stereotypical and prejudiced ideas about Roma children as wild and uncivilised, and about Roma parents as unengaged and having low aspirations for their children. From the vantage point of the Roma families, their experiences at the drop-in seemed like a poignant reminder that even an informal drop-in that they generally found to be supportive, friendly and welcoming would display unease with how their children behaved or were looked after. In this sense, only worse could be expected from social care services or other authorities.

***Who defines risk?*** The case analysis illustrated how two distinctively different evaluations of a specific risk developed, each of them informed by particular sets of information, knowledge and experience. Importantly, each of them led to responses and actions that can be considered as ‘rational’ and meaningful: Roma families wanting to protect their children, and project workers and other volunteers wanting to provide effective support to these families.

In relation to defining/identifying migrants’ risks, more generally, the case study calls for an understanding of risk beyond probability calculations based on numerical facts and for a greater attention to the experiences and perspectives of migrants themselves. By showing how risk is socially constructed and negotiated, this section raises the question of who defines a particular risk? Who, for example, is in the position to claim one’s risk definition to be ‘the right one’ while dismissing another view as ‘irrational’ and ‘panicky’? This, in turn, invites and requires us to reflect on our own preconceived ideas about migrants or specific ethnic groups as well as our claims to knowledge about the risks and problems they face in the places where they live.

### 3. Conclusion and recommendations

This policy paper has questioned the role of ethnicity in the support and services provided to Czech- and Slovak-speaking migrants living in Glasgow. It has shown how, in practice, the shift in support and services targeting ‘the Roma migrants’ in the city in order to tackle what was understood as their long-standing discrimination and marginalisation amounted to an ethnicisation of need, which had problematic implications for affected migrants as well as service providers. The paper argued that this mobilisation of resources led not only to the exclusion of some migrants from much needed services but that specific related practices also essentialised Roma as a homogenous group with greater needs, thus perpetuating their stigmatisation and marginalisation. By providing an empirical example from the study, the paper also illustrated how this ethnicisation can hinder our understanding of migrants’ risks. Overall, it is argued that in order to understand risks and problems that migrants face in the cities and localities in which they live it is necessary to critically revisit our own concepts and understandings and to take seriously migrants’ views and experiences as they are shaped in specific places and contexts.

In light of the above findings, the paper makes the following key recommendations:

- ***Supporting and promoting inclusive services***

While the wish to tailor programmes or projects to specific marginalised groups may be legitimate, policy-makers and practitioners might consider whether ethnic group belonging best determines the varying needs of individual migrants. In order to avoid the various negative consequences arising from an ethnicisation of need outlined above, it is suggested that institutionally provided forms of support are set up to be as inclusive as possible and should have the capacity to adapt their remit upon feedback ‘from below’. This principle has been more recently adopted by some local authorities in the UK (such as Birmingham, Leicester, Hackney, Newham) in response to the changing dynamics of ethnicity and diversification of urban areas in the UK and elsewhere.<sup>25</sup>

- ***Avoiding essentialising practices***

In connection to the first point, it is further recommended that essentialising practices such as the ‘ethnic eligibility tick-box’ or ‘Roma mapping study’ mentioned above are avoided. The paper has shown that not only do these practices lead to the generation of unreliable data, but they also run the risk of perpetuating existing stereotypes and prejudices against affected migrants. This is not to say that ethnicity both as a group classification and a sense of belonging do not play a role in people’s lives, but taking ethnicity as a straightforward, ‘naturally existing’ category has problematic implications. In processes of

data collection, policy design and service delivery, ethnicity should be understood as one of various factors that interact and shape specific outcomes.

▪ ***Being attentive to migrants' concerns and needs***

The various examples provided throughout the paper and their analysis emphasise the importance of taking migrants' perspectives and everyday experiences more seriously. While there seems to be a growing recognition of the relevance of migrants' past experiences in their countries of origin for understanding their problems, views, and needs in the 'host society', often such efforts stop at providing overly simplified and essentialising cultural explanations for individual's situation or actions. Likewise, it should be acknowledged that migrants acquire new knowledge and experiences in the receiving country; therefore, they are not determined solely by their past experiences nor do they uniformly lack knowledge of 'the system here'. Rather, their everyday encounters with people, institutions and systems in the places in which they come to live, including experiences of everyday prejudice and various forms of discrimination, impact on what these migrants perceive as problems and risks and how they negotiate them.

▪ ***Challenging our own bias***

Taking migrants' concerns seriously requires our ability to question our own assumptions and the structures and ideas that underpin them. While this might be perhaps the most challenging insight, the policy paper has provided several ways in which this can be achieved. For example, there is a need for critically reviewing common understandings of concepts such as ethnicity or risk but also for remaining attuned to what kinds of services are relevant for migrants rather than making assumptions about their needs based on generalisations or preconceived ideas about their vulnerability.

▪ ***Being self-reflexive***

One of the key policy lessons coming out of this paper is that well-meaning and well-intentioned ideas do not automatically lead to positive outcomes for those intended to benefit from them. The findings of this paper thus invite us to be self-reflexive regarding the consequences of the categories, concepts and practices that we use and implement and, ultimately, to seek ways to minimise potential harm.

## Acknowledgement

This paper is based on the PhD research project, *'Everyday negotiations of in/securities and risks: an ethnographic study amongst Czech- and Slovak-speaking migrants in Glasgow'*, which was co-funded by the ESRC and Glasgow City Council. The author would especially like to thank Edelweisse Thornley, Glasgow City Council, for her comments and feedback on various drafts of the paper.

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### ENDNOTES:

<sup>1</sup> The PhD thesis was completed in February 2015 at the University of Glasgow; it is now freely available online and can be accessed at the following link: <http://theses.gla.ac.uk/6315/>.

<sup>2</sup> The eight accession countries were Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia and Slovenia. In 2007 two more countries joined the EU, Romania and Bulgaria.

<sup>3</sup> The WRS data are, however, generally recognised as problematic because not everyone registered with the Scheme (for example, self-employed migrants were not obliged to do so), and because the WRS did not require deregistration upon a person's move away from a council area. There is therefore a lack of robust quantitative data on this population, and although there are suggestions that the 2008-2009 economic crises has affected this migration, there is still a significant number of these migrants living in the Glasgow and more generally in Scotland/UK.

<sup>4</sup> The Scottish Government Social Research, *Recent migration into Scotland* (Scottish Government, 2009).

<sup>5</sup> Glasgow City Council, *Population by ethnicity in Glasgow estimates of changes 2001-2011 for Strategic Planning Areas and Neighbourhoods* (Glasgow City Council, 2013).

<sup>6</sup> Blake Stevenson Report, *A8 nationals in Glasgow* (Glasgow City Council, 2007).

<sup>7</sup> This gap was also recognised in 2009 by the Scottish Government Research' report *Recent Migration into Scotland*.

<sup>8</sup> These kind of connections have their roots in the linguistic similarity between Slovak and Czech as well as in the common history of Czechoslovakia and could be found, for example, in a number of shared services and projects for Slovak and Czech nationals in Glasgow's voluntary sector as well as in well frequented Facebook groups such as 'Czechs and Slovaks in Glasgow' and another one covering Scotland as a whole. Czech and Slovak are mutually intelligible West Slavic languages, and the communication between Czechs and Slovaks can be characterised as a sort of 'passive bilingualism'. The two languages are closely related in terms of vocabulary, phonetics and grammar so that speakers of one of the languages can generally understand a speaker of the other language without ever having learnt the latter. However, studies have indicated that this mutual intelligibility varies in the population of Slovakia and the Czech Republic, especially nowadays in the younger generation who have grown up after the split of Czechoslovakia.

<sup>9</sup> The key informants included women and men, Czech and Slovak speakers, Roma and non-Roma, different age groups, living in different parts of Glasgow, and included single, married, divorced, widowed persons and individuals living with their partners, with their partners and children, or as single parents. They held varying jobs such as housekeepers in hotels, factory workers, project workers in the third sector, interpreters, agency workers/temps, kitchen porters, car washers, etc., both self-employed and employed, as well as students who worked alongside their studies and people with multiple jobs. The sample also included people who were not in employment. In the sample were individuals who were fluent in English as well as those with little or no English.

<sup>10</sup> For further reading see Wimmer and Glick Schiller, *Methodological nationalism and beyond: nation-state building, migration and social sciences* (Global Networks, 2002); Glick Schiller *et al.*, *Beyond the ethnic lens: locality, globality, and born-again incorporation* (American Ethnologist, 2006).

<sup>11</sup> See Andreas Wimmer's article, *How (not) to think about ethnicity in immigrant societies: toward a boundary-making perspective* (Oxford: COMPAS, University of Oxford, 2007); and also Wimmer's paper, *The making and unmaking of ethnic boundaries: a multilevel process theory* (American Journal of Sociology, 2008).



<sup>12</sup> The event was attended by as many as 50 participants representing various sectors (local authorities, charities and non-governmental organisations as well as the Scottish Government). Also participating in the conference and giving a keynote opening speech was the deputy First Minister for Scotland.

<sup>13</sup> New groups such as Roma Local Action Plan and structures were put in place to coordinate and integrate the existing services and identify new resources.

<sup>14</sup> Adamova *et al.*, *Report on information collated between March and June 2007* (Glasgow: Braendam Link 2007).

<sup>15</sup> The Social Marketing Gateway, *Mapping the Roma community in Scotland* (Glasgow, 2013).

<sup>16</sup> The study employed methods such as online consultations of local authorities and interviews with key stakeholder organisations, asking them to provide information on the number of Roma living in a particular area, the locations in which Roma were concentrated, the issues and challenges faced by this population, etc.

<sup>17</sup> Amongst the prominent social scientists who have challenged the prevailing orthodoxy of risk are Douglas, *Risk and Blame* (London: Routledge, 1992); Adams, *Risk* (London: University College London Press, 1996); Beck, *Risk Society* (London: SAGE, 1992).

<sup>18</sup> The documentary, *Bez detí neodídem* ('I won't leave without [my] children'), was originally broadcasted at 10.30pm local time on Slovak TV channel, *Televízia JOJ*.

<sup>19</sup> Many Roma migrants living in Glasgow had access to Slovak TV channels via satellite and other media through the internet; they came to know about this incident not through the UK media but via Slovakian and Czech media and other social media channels.

<sup>20</sup> There were various people who visited the drop-in. These included individuals from different agencies who came to provide advice and support to migrants on a range of issues but also others (e.g., journalists, artists, photographers) who were interested in collaborative work and projects with Roma migrants.

<sup>21</sup> It should be noted that the BBC programme construed this mainly as a major problem for the British social services rather than as an issue for Roma families.

<sup>22</sup> This 'problem' had escalated to such an extent that Slovak authorities had become involved in family court cases heard in the UK.

<sup>23</sup> Although there was only little TV coverage of these cases (especially compared to the coverage of the case of the non-Roma Slovak family), they seemed to have caused some concern amongst Czech and Slovak Roma migrants living in the UK. In order to address these concerns, for example, gatherings were held in August 2012 in Rotherham and Peterborough, which were attended by a significant number of Roma migrants (up to 200 people were reported to have attended the meeting in Rotherham) and relevant local authorities.

<sup>24</sup> European Roma Rights Centre, *Challenging coercive sterilisations of Romani women in the Czech Republic* (Budapest: European Roma Rights Centre, 2005). See also, Stracansky, *Apologising to sterilised Roma women - Slovakia's turn* (Inter Press Service, 2009).

<sup>25</sup> See Berg and Sigona, *Ethnography, diversity and urban space*, (Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power, 2013). See also the IPPR flagship report *Shared ground: strategies for living together in an era of high immigration* (London: IPPR, 2014).

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